

**PUBLIC INPUT MEETING
OFF-HIGHWAY MOTOR VEHICLE RECREATION COMMISSION
FEBRUARY 21, 2004
9:30 A.M.**

Welcome by Paul Spitler, Chair, OHMVR Commission: I want to welcome everyone to the annual public workshop of the OHV Commission. We appreciate you coming here today on your Saturday and spending the day here giving input to the Commission on the grants program.

I just want to say a few words to open the meeting and to provide a little bit of context. As you know this meeting is to provide input on the state's program and I thought it would be helpful if I offered some background on how we got to the point we are today.

Many of you know that I come from a conservation background, working for many years for wilderness and wildlife protection in California. When I joined the Commission a little over four years ago, it was our perspective that the program was seriously out of balance and that lack of balance was reflected in litigation, legislation and the gridlock that ensued. The environmental community and the off-road community spent many years fighting over this program, which at one time was shut down due to litigation from the environmental community. There was a fundamental lack of agreement on how to run this program and how to insure proper management of off-highway vehicles in California. At that time the environmental community was ready and poised to try to end this program entirely. That has changed substantially in the past four years. I think one of the centerpieces of that change has been the OHV Stakeholders Roundtable - with environmental communities, off-highway recreation communities and others sitting down together seeking ways to improve this program, both for the environment and the riders. After three years of hard work and consensus building the OHV Stakeholders Roundtable helped to pass AB 2274 a year and half ago. The product of that consensus was the unanimous passage of the legislation in both the Assembly and the Senate and signature by Governor Davis. A pretty unprecedented feat in these polarized times.

The legislation provided new emphasis on conservation, restoration, law enforcement, and brought a much-needed balance to this program. The environmental community was very much pleased with the results, the off-highway vehicle community was pleased with the results and the program today enjoys popular support.

As I mentioned, I have been on the Commission a little over four years and certainly have learned a lot along the way. Many of you know that one of the things I care most deeply about is restoration of areas that have been damaged by off-road vehicle use. That was one of the program emphases of AB 2274. But I have also learned that restoration by itself won't work if the trails are not properly maintained. Without adequate maintenance, the restoration and the other conservation work we hope to achieve, is bound to fail. We can't have riders seeking alternate routes to a rutted, unproductive trail creating new damage that causes the need for new restoration. Both trail maintenance and restoration need to take place.

My good friend, Ed Waldheim, who annually convinces me to get in one of his sand rails with him, has certainly taught me a lot. We went out to the Jawbone-Dove Springs areas to look at some of the trails and at the restoration work. We saw where off-road riding had taken place

illegally due to a worn out rutted trail. I was persuaded that restoration on its own in that area would be unsuccessful as long as the worn out trail was not repaired and maintained.

Similarly, I have learned, in the last four years working in this program, that enforcement as well won't work without making riding opportunity available. I went down at the request of conservation groups and off-road groups to look at some problem areas in Riverside a couple years ago. This was an area where there was wide spread illegal riding causing impact to species habitat, damaging the environment, and affecting private property. My initial response was that these people were breaking the law and we needed to step up the law enforcement and put these guys in jail. After talking to the sheriff and the local county supervisors, I was persuaded that there was so much interest in riding and so little opportunity to ride that until a good opportunity was provided for those kids to ride their bikes, law enforcement efforts were bound to fail. Our efforts to protect the environment and achieve conservation results were bound to fail also. That is why I, and others on the Commission, supported the establishment of the first State Vehicular Recreation area in 20 years in Riverside County. I want this program to work, and I think everyone in this room wants this program to work, and I certainly learned in the past four years that for this program to work, it would take the support of both the environmental and off-highway community. We can't go back to the gridlock and we can't go back to where we were.

The threat to this program and OHV recreation no longer is perceived to be from the environmental community. Lack of trail maintenance, and development moving into areas adjacent to popular OHV facilities, these are the threats we are facing today. We need to work together to try to solve these threats. I think the priorities of this program continue to be restoration and conservation work, but I also think the priority of this program is to sustain the opportunity we have today for OHV recreation. We are trying our best to do that. This last month we supported additional funds for Prairie City in order to provide a buffer for that facility, a very popular SVRA, the site of the Hangtown Classic. We are looking at other opportunities to sustain existing OHV opportunities that exist today and not lose those to development and sprawl. I think the other priorities for this program include new opportunities; Riverside SRVA is a prime example, a program that is being initiated with wide support the OHV and environmental communities. This is a new model on how to provide OHV recreation in a very difficult climate. Trail maintenance needs to be a priority of this program and needs to be emphasized. We are looking for new methods to provide maintenance in a cost-effective ways, such as "Hot-Shot" crews and other opportunities. We will certainly ask your input in how to make those processes work.

These are difficult times, obviously, for any state program, but particularly OHV with the state budget climate. Many of you know that we were close to losing the entire grant budget last year when some of the legislators were calling for removing the trust fund monies and restoring them to the general fund to pay off the budget debt. The environmental community worked very hard with the OHV community to make sure that didn't happen, to make sure our funds remained in the program. We certainly have the same threats this year. We have a lot to lose if we don't find ways to work together. So I look forward to everyone's input on how we can continue to build this great program; how we build balance in this program; how we address all our needs, whether they be conservation or trail maintenance; or new opportunities; and how we can continue to improve and expand this program as we move forward.

Thank you.